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## Action research in language learning

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### Abstract

Over the last two decades, action research has become increasingly popular in foreign and second language teaching classes. Action research can be a very valuable way to extend teachers teaching skills and gain more understanding of themselves as teachers, their classrooms and their students. This paper focuses to provide a rationale on the use of action research in foreign and second language education. Then, the nature, scope and the framework of action research will be described. Finally, the current action research models that have become increasingly popular in foreign and second language teaching classes will be discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Throughout action research development, different people have come to understand action research in different ways. From its beginnings in the 1930s, it was seen as an applied social science. Kurt Lewin, one of its acknowledged founding fathers, was himself a social scientist, promoted action research on the basis that workers' greater involvement would probably improve their productivity. (McFarland & Stansell, 1993) "Lewin is credited with coining the term 'action research' to describe work that did not separate the investigation from the action needed to solve the problem" (p.14). The idea of action research was taken up vigorously in education in 1950s America, but later went into decline. In the 1970s it received a new impetus in the UK through the work of researchers such as John Elliott, Jack Whitehead, Wilf Carr and Stephen Kemmis. Elliott developed action research as a form of professional development for teachers. At the same time as Elliott was developing his work, Jack Whitehead was also developing a new approach to action research. He took the view that teachers were perfectly capable of generating their personal theories by systematically studying their practice. Their theories would contain the descriptions and explanations they offered for their practices as they asked, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead, 1989). The work of Elliott and Whitehead has been profoundly influential over the years in presenting action research as a legitimate educational research methodology. While the literature contains a respectable amount of studies conducted in foreign and second language classrooms, clearly there is a need for additional research. A few educators have discussed the possibilities of teacher research for foreign and second

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language education (Johnson, 1992; Nunan, 1992; Nunan & Lamb, 1996, Wallace 1998) but very little has been published in journals on teacher action research, i.e., teacher as researcher (Haley, 2005)

## **2. Rationale for the use of action research in foreign and second language Classroom**

Increasingly language teachers are required not only to teach in the classroom but also to do research. While teachers are knowledgeable about teaching, many of them may not be as knowledgeable about doing research. Action research is becoming a tool for school reform; as its very individual focus allows for a new engagement in educational change. Some of the most beneficial aspects about teacher action research are that it is small scale, contextualized, localized, and aimed at discovering, developing, or monitoring changes to practice (Wallace, 2000). In action research language teachers develop insights into their students' learning from observing their behavior. Reflective teachers analyze the students' behaviors, identify potential problems, modify their teaching practices, and evaluate the results. (Chamot, et al., 1998). However, language teachers who engage in action research are developing their professional judgment and autonomy and encourage new teaching strategies and implies a different way of generating knowledge.

## **3. The nature of Action Research**

Essentially, action research is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm it involves the collection and analysis of data related to professional development. It focuses on individual and small group professional practice to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem, or issue. Library project, problem-solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, doing research on or about students and learning why teacher do certain things are not action research but rather it is about acquiring knowledge how to improve teaching strategies, involves teachers working to improve their skills. It is also about how teacher can do things better and how teacher can change their instruction to impact students. "Therefore action research seek initially to clarify the issue investigated and to reveal the way participants describe their actual experience of that issue—how things happen and how it affects them" (Stringer, 2007, p. 20).

## **4. The scope of action research**

Action research as a method is impressive. It may be used in almost any setting where a problem involving people, tasks and procedures cries out for solution, or where some change of feature results in a more desirable outcome (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Action research can be used in a variety of areas, for example: teaching methods—replacing a traditional method by a discovery method; learning strategies—adopting an integrated approach to learning in preference to a single subject style of teaching and learning; attitudes and values—encouraging more positive attitudes to work, or modifying pupils' value systems with regard to some aspect of life; continuing professional development of teachers—improving teaching skills, developing new methods of learning, increasing powers of analysis, of heightening self-awareness (Holly & Whitehead, 1986, p. 243).

## **5. Definition of Action Research**

Action researches are executed in the era of education, Hence pupils and teachers are formally the subject of educational research. Therefore the most relevant action research definitions would be revealed by (Mills, 2003) who provides the following definition: "Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes" (p. 4).

## 6. Framework for Action Research

Mills (2003) developed the following framework for action research: 1. Describe the problem and area of focus; 2. Define the factors involved in your area of focus (e.g., the curriculum, school setting, student outcomes, and instructional strategies); 3. Develop research questions; 4. Describe the intervention or innovation to be implemented; 5. Develop a timeline for implementation; 6. Describe the membership of the action research group; 7. Develop a list of resources to implement the plan; 8. Describe the data to be collected; 9. Develop a data collection and analysis plan; 10. Select appropriate tools of inquiry; 11. Carry out the plan (implementation, data collection, data analysis); 12. Report the results. This deductive approach implements a planned intervention, monitors its implementation, and evaluates the results.

A more inductive approach, formulated by Burns (1999), is to carry out action research to explore what changes need to be made or what actions need to be taken in a specific instructional setting. Burns suggests the following interrelated activities: Explore an issue in teaching or learning; Identify areas of concern; Observe how those areas play out in the setting of the study; Discuss how the issue might be addressed; Collect data to determine the action to be taken (e.g., student questionnaires, observation reports, journal entries); Plan strategic actions based on the data to address the issue.

Burns' focuses on planning for action, whereas Kemmis and McTaggart's approach focuses on implementing an action plan. (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Program, 1988) suggest that the fundamental components of action research include the following: (1) developing a plan for improvement, (2) implementing the plan, (3) observing and documenting the effects of the plan, and (4) reflecting on the effects of the plan for further planning and informed action. A review of action research frameworks reveals several common features. An action research project seeks to create knowledge, propose and implement change, and improve practice and performance (Stringer, 1999)

## 7. Action Research Models

### 7.1 Stringer's Model

A fundamental premise of Stringer's (1999) community-based action research purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus resolving problems that confront them. Community-based action research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values. According to Stringer (2007) the basic action research routines provides a simple yet powerful framework—look, think, act that enables people to commence their inquiries in a straightforward manner and build greater detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increases. (Stringer, Christensen, & Baldwin, 2009) believes the cyclical Look–Think–Act steps of action research thus are incorporated into each phase of instruction, providing carefully articulated processes that enhance both teacher instruction and student learning (p.12).

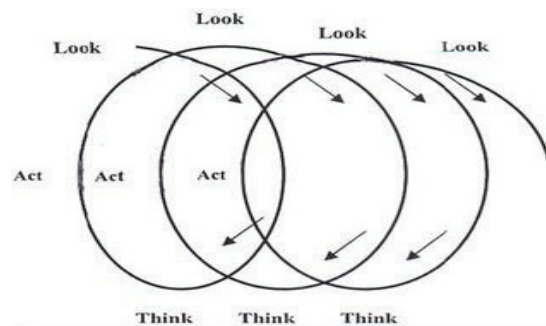


Figure 1. Action Research Cycle (2009)

## 7.2 Mills's Mode

(Mills, 2000, 2003) has presented a four-step action research process which he termed "dialectic action research spiral" which is shown in Figure 2. This model was described by Mills as "research done by teachers and for teachers and students, not research done on them, and as such is a dynamic and responsive model that can be adapted to different contexts and purposes" (Mills, 2000, 19). Clearly, this action research model shares some common elements: a sense of purpose based on a 'problem' or "area of focus" (identification of an area of focus), observation or monitoring of practice (collection of data), synthesis of information gathered (analysis and interpretation of data), and some form of "action" that invariably "spirals" the researcher back into the process repeatedly (development of an action plan).

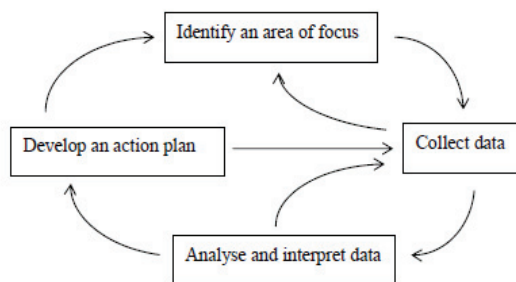


Figure 2: Dialectic Action Research Spiral. Mills (2003, pp.18-19)

## 7.3 Wallace's Model

Wallace's action research Model (1993) demonstrates a particular strategy for accelerating and enhancing reflective development, with special reference to language teaching. This strategy was basically a way of reflecting on whatever ELT teachers do in their teaching. It is done by systematically collecting data; every day practice and analyzing it in order to arrive at some decisions about what teacher future practice should be.

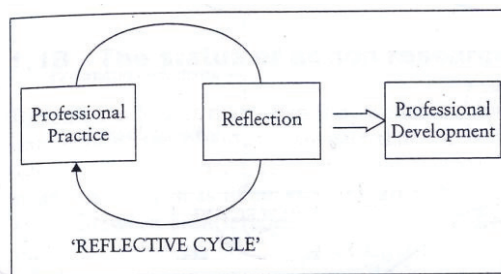


Figure 3. The reflective cycle and professional development

Wallace (1991) proposed a model for teacher education at the core which was a process of reflection on professional action. This model was called "reflective cycle" which provides the momentum for increased professional competence. It involves the collection and analysis of data related to some aspect of our professional practice. "This is done so that teachers can reflect on what they have discovered and apply it to their professional action. This is a loop process, in the sense that the process can be repeated (reframing the problem, collecting fresh data, rethinking our analysis, etc.) until teachers have found a solution that satisfies them" (Wallace, 1993, p16).

## 8. Conclusion

Presenting these three practical models of action research: Firstly, to provide an overview of action research to help the reader gain an understanding of the whole process. Secondly, it is to demonstrate that despite the rapid growth of action research models, they do, in fact, share more similarities than differences. There is a high degree of consensus among those who write on the subject about overall method and purpose. This article was introducing action research to give ELT teachers an introduction to the variety of methods available to them as a means of extending their repertoire of professional practices and of encouraging flexibility in professional development. These are methods and approaches that teachers can put into use that will empower them, and make them increasingly competent and 'autonomous in professional judgment'. All the presented models have enjoyed varying degree of popularity, depending on the context in which they have been applied but action research model for language teachers that was specified by Wallace (1991-1993), however, was not to turn the ELT teacher into a researcher, but to help him or her to continue to develop as a teacher, using action research as a tool in this process. The important thing is that the processes involved are helpful to the practicing teacher's reflection irrespective of whether they can be verified by someone else. In Wallace's Model Language teachers will be putting planning theory into classroom practice and it constitutes a resolution to the teaching theory-practice issue.

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